The real Devdas tragedy: the journey to Bollywood

Between Chattopadhyay's book and the film is a world lost to the lure of sets and costumes, says **Anjana Guha Chatterjee**

SARAT Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) was probably the most popular and highest read Bengali writer outside Bengal. Translated in various Indian languages, as many as 12 of his novels were translated in Gujarati alone during his lifetime. So it was heartening to find a team of three Gujaratis working together on a film based on his *Devdas*. The result was expected to be an authentic masterpiece.

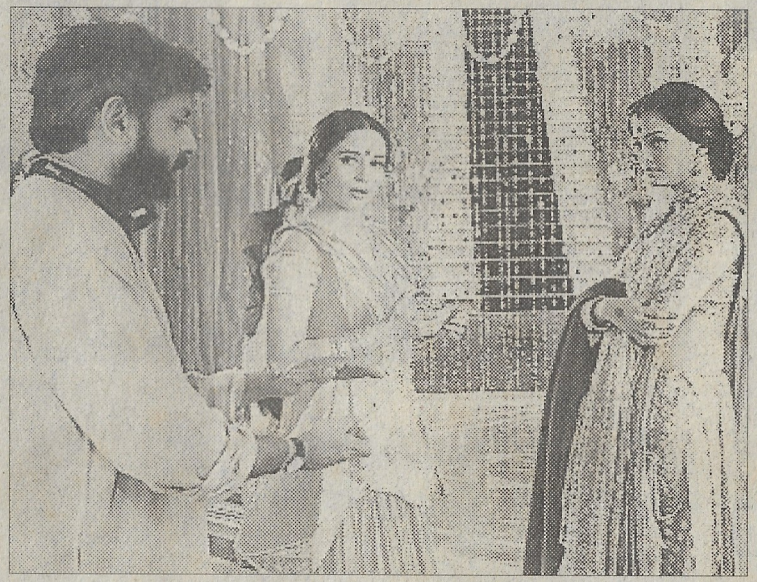
The novel *Devdas* (1917) depicted early twentieth century Bengal. With all the hype over authenticity of costume, it was understood that director Sanjay Leela Bhansali was trying to recreate the exact period and culture of *Devdas* unlike Shyam Benegal's *Kalyug*, which adapted the Mahabharata in the modern context. The expectations of loyalty to social institutions of that particular milieu in Bhansali's film naturally followed.

From the sociologist's point of view, institutions are systems of social norms which in turn are a society's rules of conduct for its members. With different cultures existing in different parts of India, one had to be cautious while dealing with such norms in a particular cultural context.

During Parvati's marriage, the director used two typical rituals of a Bengali wedding—*lajanjali* (an offering of *khoi* in the sacred fire as a symbol of the bride's virginity) and *sindoor* (token of a married woman)—to establish a Bengali society.

Again, the film opened on a huge *haveli* with a lady announcing the news of her son's return from London. Dressed as an aristocratic Bengali lady, she came across a group of girls making arrangements for Durga Puja. Bengali words were strewn in their dialogues. A Bengali 'milieu' was subtly established at the very beginning. But Bhansali's knowledge of the then Bengali society proved to be peripheral.

In the film we saw Sumitra (Parvati's mother) proclaiming victory by blowing a conch shell at the hour of Kaushalya's (Devdas's mother and the zamindar's wife) misery. It was an ignorant distortion of that particular social reality. No subject would dare such hostility towards the zamindar. And the question wouldn't arise as a zamindar-subject bond in Bengal was more of a father-son than the typical Thakur Singh-villager relationship shown in Hindi movies. Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* showcased one such zamindar and his unique relationship with his subjects.



Chandramukhi's visit to Talshona (the estate of Parvati's in-laws) should also have raised many eyebrows in Parvati's household, because it was unconventional for a respectable lady to travel without either a male or an elderly woman as chaperone. That Parvati's in-laws were least suspicious, merely underlined the social unreality of the film. Screened at Cannes, didn't it represent a distorted social history of Bengal to the rest of the world?

Bhansali distorted history and violated social codes in the name of poetic liberty. For example, *veshyadwar mrittika*, commonly called *punnimaati* (sacred clay) in Bengal, is indeed a vital element for making any Durga idol. *Veshyadwar mrittika* literally means the clay found at a prostitute's doorstep. Durga Puja is the community festival of Bengal, hence the "feet dust" of people from every strata of society is required to sanctify the deity. And where else to get *punni-maati* but at a prostitute's doorstep!

But would a conservative family like Parvati's in-laws send their *bahu* to a prostitute's house for collecting *veshyadwar mrittika*? All alone? And was a woman entitled to bring *punnimaati*? I doubt it.

This also emphasised the absurdity of the situation created, to make Parvati and Chandramukhi meet. That Bhansali had not done his homework was also apparent in the sets of the *kothas*. Every city had its unique characteristics, so did its red light areas. A *kotha* of Lucknow would be very different from the *cages* of Kamatipura in Mumbai. The narrow lanes of Sonagachhi, Garanhata and Harkata in Kolkata had their unique characteristics which was evident even in the architecture of the houses where the prostitutes lived. But the architectural milieu depicted in Bhansali's *Devdas* bore no resemblance to its Kolkata counterpart.

Bhansali had given us a glimpse of the Kali temple of Dakshineshwar while a heartbroken Devdas was drifting across the Ganges in a boat. Was it to place us in the right social context? Then why did the area where Chandramukhi lived looked more like Meena Bazar and less like Chitpur?

Bhansali's masterstroke was the dance sequence at the Puja venue at Parvati's house. It not only distorted history but misrepresented an existent social code. No Bengali Hindu family, let alone a aristocratic one, would have their *bahu* without a *ghoonghat* celebrating Durga Puja by dancing lithely around with a strange woman, with all her seniors watching. It was as atrocious as showing a conservative Jain family cooking chicken at home!

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Bhansali concentrated more on sets, costumes and other ornamentations instead of the characters. That is why the characters seemed unreal in the film. For instance, Kaushalya was the wife of the zamindar of Talshona village. Under no circumstance would she take a marathon race across the stretch of her *haveli* announcing the news of her son's homecoming! Sumitra, too, was abnormally loud at every instance—be it her daughter's love for Devdas, the possibility of their marriage and the failure of the marriage proposal. Sarat Chandra's Sumitra was a decent, loving rural mother. Bhansali's Sumitra was crass, vindictive and uncultured.

Parvati, the female protagonist of Sarat Chandra's *Devdas* was much younger to Devdas, which made her worship him as a superior. That was the clue to her patient submission to her Dev*da*'s endless "tyranny". Gradually, her young love blossomed into a bold and confident adulation that matured her as a woman of great strength of character. In Bhansali's film, Parvati's childhood never featured except for a couple of shots showing her sitting or running.

With Chandramukhi, the director seemed confused whether to show her as a prostitute or as a respectable woman. Madhuri had attempted to capture the subtle nuances of a prostitute in love, but the moment she slapped Kali*babu*, the reality of the character fell apart, leaving her as just Madhuri, the glamorous queen of Bollywood.

At the end of his novel, Sarat Chandra beseeched his readers to shed a tear for his hapless protagonist. At the end of Bhansali's film, one was inclined to shed a tear for Sarat Chandra instead! Bhansali's right. His film is in no way Sarat Chandra's *Devdas*. It was entirely Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*.

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